TRUE LIVING

—IN—

THE HOME.

The following very interesting paper, of which Mrs. President Perry is the author, was read at the last meeting of the W. C. T. U. by Mrs. W. M. Ogle, President of that organization:

TRUE LIVING IN THE HOME.

The question that was old, ages old, when Pontius Pilate asked it on that most terrible day in all the world's history, is still echoing through the centuries—"What is Truth?"—what is it?

The truth has been revealed to us through Christ, and it has made us free, but still the question in one form or another comes knocking at the individual conscience. How much of the truth do I apprehend? What is the truth for me with regard to a particular course of action? Knowing the truth, how far and how often do I apply it? What is my standard of true living? No one should pay more sensitive heed to these questions and answer them more honestly than the mother. The man may be the head of the family, but the woman is the heart of it, and most often determines the character of the home life.

There is but one ideal for the true life, whether it be the individual life or the life of the home, which is only the individual life multiplied. The one pattern is the Christ life. If we recall that one perfect life and listen to its harmony we shall hear sounding persistently through it three dominant notes—simplicity, sincerety, self-sacrifice. These same tones must be heard in every harmonious life. This is the chord to which every true home life must be tuned. We may add sweetness and depth to our harmony by adding sympathetic interest, beauty, and ease, comfort and culture, but this chord must lie at the foundation. Most clearly from our American homes should these tones be heard, for in simplicity, sincerity, and self-sacrifice was our American home life founded. Whatever faults our Pilgrim Fathers may have had, these were their virtues; rigid they may have been, but simple they surely were; over zealous perhaps, but no one has ever questioned their sincerity, "a masterful sincerity" Dr. Storrs called it. And their self-sacrifice was patent to all the world when they gave up home and country, friends and lands, comfort and wealth for what they believed to be true and right. How far are we in sympathy with them? How far have we departed from these, their virtues?

It was said, in substance, in a recent sermon preached in this city: "You may honor your New England ancestry by your societies of Sons and Daughters of the Revolution, Colonial Dames, and Mayflower Descendants, you may gather their colonial furniture and ancient china, but you must also imitate their virtues." From one of these virtues we are departing, and at a rapid pace. Every day our modern life grows more complicated, as, indeed, to a certain extent it must. We can no more return to the primitive life of two hundred years ago than we can replace the virgin forests of the Massachusetts coast or the Indian tribes of Connecticut. But since complexity of life brings with it great dangers, what shall we do about it? Just this: we can make up our minds at once and for all to assume the least number of complexities consistent with existence and progress.

Mr. Charles Dudley Warner, in his book of very delightful essays, entitled "The Relation of Literature to Life," has pertinently defined simplicity as "making the journey of this life with just baggage enough."

Judged by this definition we of this present time are anything but simple. We sing "I'm a pilgrim and I'm a stranger; I can tarry, I can tarry but a night," and declare that we "nightly pitch our moving tents a day's march nearer home," but while we sing we contradict the sentiment of the song by loading ourselves with increased burdens in the way of more elaborate dress, furniture and decorations, and social observances. It does not take a long memory to recall the marvelous increase in these things in a quarter century, yes, in a decade. Now, we all have a standard of true living, an ideal home life, unto which we have not attained, we confess, yet which we believe in as true and beautiful, and even possible. But it is impossible for us to reach this ideal if we are carrying too much unnecessary baggage. There used to be on our streets an old colored woman who collected rags and papers. She had four or five sacks, of which when filled she could carry but two. She used to carry two at a time for the distance of a block or so, leave them to bring up anther two, and then repeat the process. It seemed a slow journey, but she got them all home in time, probably because she took all day for it and had nothing else to do. But our day is short, our strength is small, and we can never reach any ideal life if we are cumbered with too much rubbish. Therefore as the first step towards true living in our homes let us simplify, deliberately and determinedly. We must put behind our backs many alluring things. We must take account of our position in life, our means, and our strength, and then do only those things best suited to our place, our pocket, and our physical ability. And why? Because the departure from simplicity is a menace to a true home life in more than one way. Complexity and elaboration mean time and strength. Time and strength so expended mean for the average home-maker just so much withdrawn from other things. The care of too many rugs and draperies and much bric-a-brac means only too often less time for the companionship of the children; the attempt to keep the family wardrobe quite up to, or a little ahead of, the decrees of fashion means less time for culture, for hospitality, for friendship, for the obtaining of competent service in the household, for much that makes life truly rich and comfortable and beautiful.

The departure from simplicity to elaboration means also an ever-increasing desire for more luxury, more refinements, more style, and leads often into what we call living beyond one's means, which is, in plain speech, dishonesty. Nothing can be more destructive of home life than this; frequently the outcome is a collapse, accompanied by dishonor, punishment, and life-long shame and sorrow. In any case it means endless anxiety for some one, generally the father, on whom the financial burden rests, perpetual worry for the mother ever planning more social triumphs, greater elaboration, out of nothing,—broken health perhaps,—and is for the children a daily lesson in falsehood, for the whole life is a lie. It is in reality saying that we are so and so and have such and such, which we neither have nor are. Why try to grow roses on an apple tree? Why struggle to be the thing we are not, to fill the position in which we are placed? Why spend the money which we have not earned, or, if it is honestly ours, have earned only with the heart's blood, on vanity of vanities? Is it not better far to be content to live simply, to be ourselves, than to strain so hard to be as others, to do and have just the very things they have and do? And here is one root of the matter,—we take on not the things we really care for, but those we think we must have because someone else has them.

Furthermore, the departure from simplicity leads us on into materialism, which is the temptation of the age, and materialism is a lie because it puts the visible which is the unreal above the invisible which is the real. In school and at home, in the church and the Sunday-school, in the Bible and all literature, all true literature, our children are taught that the spiritualities are the only verities, that this life is transient, that the unseen life is everlasting, that fashion and wealth and beauty and fame dissolve like the morning mist, and that character alone remains. But the home life only too often gives the lie to all this. How many children even see their parents engaged in any but material pursuits? To a certain extent this is inevitable; "Adam delved and Eve span," and still the father must toil with hands or head to earn his children's bread, and the mother must as of old bake and mend and make and tend.

But increasing complexity of life means setting more and more a value upon material things until they assume such magnitude that the spiritual is obscured, and to the growing child there will be nothing but the material, and the things of the spirit will seem but as the myths of some far-off golden age. To the maintenance, therefore, of a home life which shall contain those germs of immortality that reach over into the life beyond, it is essential that the material things of this life be emphasized as little as possible. We need not often speak before the children of the desirability and power of wealth, of fashion, or of luxuries. When we find it expedient to have new furnishings or new clothes, we need not make overmuch of the matter, and should justify such expenditures on the score of neatness, comfort, or beauty, rather than style, and we can try to teach them to be content with few things, simple food, and simple clothing for the body in order that there may be richer food for mind and soul.

Emerson, in his essay on "Domestic Life," most admirably says: "The reform that applies itself to the household must not be partial. It must correct the whole system of our social living. It must come with plain living and high thinking...the way to set the axe at the root of the tree is to raise our aim. Let us understand then that a house should bear witness in all its economy that human culture is the end to which it is built and garnished. It stand there under the sun and moon to ends analogous, and not less noble than theirs. It is not for festivity, it is not for sleep: but the pine and the oak shall gladly descend from the mountains to uphold the roof of men as faithful and necessary as themselves; to be the shelter always open to good and true persons; a hall which shines with sincerity, brows ever tranquil, and a demeanor impossible to disconcert; whose inmates know what they want; who do not ask your house how theirs should be kept. They have aims, they cannot pause for trifles. The diet of the house does not create its order, but knowledge, character, action, absorb so much life and yield so much entertainment that the refectory has not to be so curiously studied ....Let a man then say, My house is here in the county;—an eating house, a sleeping house for travelers it shall be, but it shall be much more. I pray you, O excellent wife, not to cumber yourself and me to get a rich dinner for this man or this woman who has just alighted at our gate, nor a bedchamber made ready at too great a cost. These things if they are curious in, they can get for a dollar at any village. But let this stranger, if he will, in your looks, in your accent and behavior, read your thought and will, which he cannot buy at any price in any village or city, and which he may well travel fifty miles, and dine sparely and sleep hard, in order to behold. Certainly, let the board be spread and let the bed be dressed for the traveler, but let not the emphasis of hospitality lie in these things. Honor to the house where they are simple to the verge of hardship, so that there the intellect is awake and reads the laws of the universe, the soul worships truth and love, honor and courtesy flow into all deeds."

Simplicity and sincerity are twin sisters. Simplicity may be affected, though it is usually true, but sincerity is always simple. Very much of what has been said of simple living has implied simple living as well, but there yet remains something to be said of this, the second note in our chord.

"Sincerity," says Ruskin, "is a characteristic and element of all great art." It is characteristic of all great and noble living. It should be a principle element in every home life. The home-maker ought to be as Crystal—without a flaw, clear as sunlight, and not only in speech but in intention and act. Do you say, "That is impossible; we can never attain unto that." At least we can and must strive for it for the sake of those who come after us. We believe in the ascent of man, how then shall he reach the ladder's top if we climb not the lowest round? Though we touch not the ideal, we must reach out for it. As Goethe says:

"Nothing may perish beneath the sky:
All things have their issues
That mortals try.
We are here for a day
To stamp on the clay,
A piece of ourselves
That may never die."

Absolute sincerity must be the aim of home life. If truth is not learned there it will not be found elsewhere. Falsehood learned there is not unlearned later. How came that boy to be a forger, a thief? Was not his father the very soul of honor, his mother one of the most active women in the church? Yes, but if you could read the impressions printed on the boy's sensitive mind and heart you might find such an one as this,—a picture of a day when his mother had a seamstress at work, and sufficient money to pay her for her day's labor, but in passing a florist's shop she happened to see such a lovely fern that she could not resist the temptation to purchase it, and once inside added some other trifling thing, a little bunch of violets perhaps. At six o'clock the boy heard his mother say, "I'm so sorry, Miss Brown, but I find that I have not quite enough money for your pay tonight, but I will send it to you next week." Now the boy knew of his mother's purchases and the next week he heard her say, "There, I quite forgot to send Miss Brown her money, but never mind, she can trust me and she will get it some time." Or you might find imprinted on those delicate tissues photographic representations of the many times that some mother took him in the street cars without paying a fare for him when he was two, three, or four years over age, and he could tell you that she used to laugh, and say, "What's the use of being fussy over a little thing like that? besides the company makes enough out of us anyway." Perhaps he could recall the day when his father asked, "Did you give Jane her wages last week?" and his mother replied, "No, I needed a new parasol; Jane can wait." Is it surprising that the boy has grown up believing that it is not necessary to be "fussy" over such matters, and that other people can wait for their pay,—or go without?

How came that girl to be such a liar?—her mother was such a sweet woman, and so popular. Yes, but you never knew that she won her popularity by agreeing with every one, even though she contradicted herself every half-hour.

Why did this young fellow grow up so irreligious and a Sabbath-breaker, when his parents were so devout and always attended church? They told their boy that they went to worship God, but as they walked homeward with him after the service they tore the sermon to bits, criticised the music, and talked of nothing else except Mrs. A's new bonnet and Mr. B's immense wealth. Could the lad really believe that they did go to worship the Lord?

Oh, the contradictions of our home life! The strange and awful contrasts between what we say we believe and what we live and do! How can we face them!

"Truth," said Goethe, "is a torch, but a terrible one; oftentimes so terrible that the first instinct of us all is to give a side glance, with a blinking eye, lest looking it fully in the face, the strong glare might blind us." Truth demands that each home-maker look at her home life as it is illuminated by this terrible torch, and that she leave no dark corners where contradictions may lurk unseen. It is a small matter, but after all a five-o'clock" tea table fully equipped, whereon tea was never yet served, and never will be, and which stands in a parlor only in imitation of the like article in another house which serves its purpose, is a sham. We may not deceive our neighbor by an imitation of any kind, though we flatter ourselves that we do, but we certainly put the child in our home in the way of learning the art of deception.

It is said there is a skeleton in every cupboad, and there is some untruth in every home. It is for each one of us to find that particular untruth and to banish it. In closing this section of our discussion we may refer to one of two points of departure from the truth that are not individual, but so general that criticism falls upon us all, and that is the difference between our belief about and the observance of holy days and holidays. We teach the children the original meaning of the national Thanksgiving Day, very much of it is made in the kindergarten, and they hear read or read for themselves in the daily press, the proclamations issued by the Governor of the state and the President of the nation. But when the day comes there is nothing to mark it except the turkey. When parents disregard the request of the chief magistrates to assemble themselves in their accustomed places of worship to give public thanksgiving, is it likely that the children will pay close heed to the voice of civil authority? What is true of the feast day is applicable to the annual Fast appointed in so many of the states. In how many homes is there any attention paid to it except as a day for pleasure taking?

It seems a pity to criticise anything so sweet and sacred as the great festivals of the Christian church—Christmas and Easter—but they must fast lose their meaning unless there is an effort to observe them in closer accord with that meaning. We teach the children that Christmas is the birthday of the Lord, and then, grown-up children that we are, proceed to act as if it was our own birthday. Far better is it to let the bric-a-brac and tinsel go, and to ketp the day with rejoicing and innocent pleasure, but with self-denial, that the children may see that we give not to ourselves, but to Him.

Two or three years ago the writer chanced to see the window of a fashionable "Millinery Emporium" decorated for Easter-tide. A wax figure draped in white, with one foot placed prominently forward, was labeled "Trilby"—it was during that craze—while overhead were lilies and a white dove, and an arch bearing the inscription, "Easter Offering." Trilby an Easter offering!—the thought seemed a sacrilege, but after all the very bad taste of the milliner was but typical of the "hodge-podge" that we are making of the day by mixing its religious sentiments with bonnets and gowns, flowers and dinners. There is at least one woman in the world who for the sake of a little daughter would never mention an "Easter bonnet," and if she had a new one would not don it upon that day. Unless we make effort to spiritualize these days and keep the material out of them they will become but empty symbols and the observance of them only a lie.

Self-sacrifice, we agree, is a necessary element in home life—without it the home cannot exist—but self-sacrifice may be affected by the tendencies of the age. Modern life has made us so very comfortable that we are in danger of mistaking ease and comfort for some other and better things. We do not like to get out of our reclining chairs except into rubber-tired carriages, unless it is to amuse ourselves. It is not uncommon to hear mothers of what we call the leisure class complain that they cannot care for their children, they weary them so, and to spend an afternoon with the nurse-maid is accounted a real hardship. With some knowledge of the home life of working people we can say that we have never heard that complaint from mothers in those homes. They expect to give themselves for their families and have been always accustomed to self-surrender. The weariness of which the other mothers complain is in part the result of trying to do so many things beyond the home life, but it is also an outgrowth of selfishness. Such weariness is not by any means purely physical, but is mental, a resultant of the irritation that comes from having to do the thing which we do not like to do. Accustomed to ease and to freedom, it seems hard to give them up for an hour. This is a mistake both as regards our relations to our family and also because it involves for us a loss of spiritual power. We need to keep a close watch over all selfish indulgences, our luxurious instincts, if we will teach in our homes the beauty of self-sacrifice. A little hardship now and then is good diet for the soul. "The angel of self-renunciation" to quote from Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "if admitted to intimate companionship, will prove the most noble and inspiring of friends." But, says one, there is no virtue in sacrifice unless some object is to be gained, that is, some visible, material, or spiritual benefit to others. True, we do cast contemptuous glances at St. Simeon Stylites on his pillar and the Indian devotee making a long pilgrimage with his shoes full of nails, but there is after all something finer in the saint on his column and the ignorant but faithful son of Buddha than in the soul that never rises above daily luxurious living, that cannot deny itself for a day or an hour.

But unselfishness should not end in the home, although it must begin there. That is the place to cultivate a world-wide sympathy. All human needs, every progress and reform, must enter there. A man's house may be his castle, but it need not be provided with moat and drawbridge, and a portcullis that opens but to a few. The true home like the cities of refuge in ancient Israel, should have wide gates standing open. If the Father has given to you and to me homes full of beauty and ease light and warmth, it is that we may bring into them sometimes those standing without in darkness and cold and solitude. Hospitality is not a matter of choice. It is in the Apostolic Epistles a reiterated command, and well we know that it does not mean "five o'clock teas" and dinners to our intimates. It is something broader than that and calls for some surrender of self, but its reward is large—so large that it is a wonder that we do not more often try to secure it. How averse we are to entertaining strangers, how difficult it is to find a home that will receive over night a missionary, a student, a representative of some society, and yet how often such an one when received proves himself truly "an angel unawares." For the cost of a dinner, the slight trouble of a night's lodging, you and your children may hear tales of far-off lands, may have your souls fired with the story of great sacrifice and marvelous achievement, or may have a glimpse into some rare and lovely soult. Such entertainment often repeated becomes a liberal education and one we cannot afford to miss. Bring, therefore, to your fireside, in simple fashion as you can, the workers in the world's harvest fields, those who are about their Father's business, the lonely ones, the sad, and the tempted. A simple meal, an hour's chat, may mean, how much! There is the boy away from home learning a trade or profession—give him a plate at your Sunday dinner-table—it will be heaven to him compared with the restaurant that provides his daily bread, and may save him from who knows what. Ask the teacher to your Saturday night supper, and give her a little music afterwards—she does not get that in her not very congenial boarding place. Each and every one will leave with you in return something that will warm your heart and increase your knowledege and broaden the life of your home and the culture of your children. Susan Coolidge repeats this message for us in her poem entitled "A True Home":

What is a home? A guarded space
Wherein a few, unfairly blest,
Shall sit together, face to face,
And bask, and purr, and be at rest?
Can it be this—the longed-for thing
Which wanderers on the restless foam,
Unsheltered beggars, birds on wing,
Aspire to, dream of, christian "home?"
No! Art may bloom, and peace and bliss;
Grief may refrain and death forget;
But if there be no more than this
The soul of home is wanting yet.
Dim image from far glory caught,
Fair type of fairer things to be,
The true homes rises in our thought
As beacon for all men to see.
Its lamps burn freely in the night;
Its fire-glows, unchidden, shed
Their cheering and abounding light
On homeless folk uncomforted.
Each sweet and secret thing within
Gives out a fragrance on the air—
A thankful breath sent forth to win
A little smile from others' care.
The few, they back in closer heat;
The many catch the further ray;
Life higher seems, the world more sweet,
And hope and heaven less far away.
So the old miracle anew
Is wrought on earth and proved good,
And crumbs apportioned for a few,
God-blessed, suffice a multitude.

In summing up our subject, we may fitly close with one single sentence from Dr. Horace Bushnell's oration, "The Age of Homespun": "Think true, and then respect yourselves in living exactly what you think."